



Know the Risks: Understanding Prescription Drug Misuse and Abuse

The Navy and Marine Corps' zero tolerance policies regarding drug misuse and abuse are well-known among service members – any Sailor or Marine determined to be using, possessing, trafficking, manufacturing or distributing drugs or drug abuse paraphernalia is required to be administratively separated (ADSEP) from the military.^{1,2} What some service members may not realize is that drug misuse and abuse not only includes the use of illegal drugs but also any inappropriate use of pharmaceuticals, even if they are prescribed by a healthcare provider. Understanding how to take prescription drugs appropriately can keep a Sailor or Marine safe and fit for duty, and also save their career.

What constitutes prescription drug misuse and abuse?

Drug misuse and abuse includes any inappropriate use of pharmaceuticals and use of any intoxicating substance not intended for human ingestion (such as glue or gasoline sniffing).¹

Inappropriate use of pharmaceuticals includes taking a prescription medication³:

- Outside of its intended purpose. For example, taking a narcotic now for back pain when the medication was originally prescribed a year ago following knee surgery.
- Past the prescribed date. Be sure to look at prescription labels, attached information sheets, and only take the medication for the period of time prescribed and do not take a prescription that has expired.
- In excess of the prescribed dosing regimen. Any variation of the prescribed dose can have serious health impacts.
- That was prescribed to another individual, such as a shipmate, spouse or friend.

Any time a Sailor or Marine has a positive urinalysis for a controlled substance for which they do not have a **current** prescription in their medical record, and no other valid reason can explain the positive urinalysis, they are subject to a violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Such a violation may lead to disciplinary action, such as reduction in rate or forfeiture of pay, and will result in Administrative Separation (ADSEP) processing from military service.

What are the dangers of prescription drug misuse and abuse?

All medications have potential side effects. Healthcare providers recommend prescription medications after a careful analysis of the risks and benefits of taking the medications properly while also factoring in other considerations such as health status, medications already being taken, etc. Additionally, there is clinical oversight by the provider while the individual is taking the medication. Ultimately, however, it is the service member's responsibility to ensure they are taking prescription medicine properly. If a sailor misuses prescription drugs, examples of potential risks include⁴:

- Respiratory depression from misusing pain killers, potentially leading to death.
- Withdrawal seizures from inappropriate or inconsistent use of sedatives.
- Dangerously increased blood pressure from stimulant use.



- Addiction to the medication.
- Processed for Administrative Separation from military service, including potential dishonorable or other than honorable discharge.¹

The risk for health-related side effects is increased when medication misuse is combined with alcohol consumption.

How can a service member avoid prescription drug misuse and abuse?

It is the service member's responsibility to ensure they are fully aware of the proper use of any medication they are taking, and that they understand the consequences of taking a prescription medication inappropriately. Some ways to avoid misusing prescription drugs include:

- Asking a healthcare provider questions regarding proper use of their medications.
- Carefully reading the labels and attached information sheets of all medications prior to taking them.
- Disposing of unused medications properly.
 - [Click here](#) to learn more about how to safely dispose of unused medications, or ask your local pharmacy.
- Becoming familiar with the [Navy Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Control](#) policy and the [Marine Corps Substance Abuse Program](#) policy.

Where can you go for more information?

There are many resources available if you have questions about the Navy drug abuse prevention policy:

- Visit the [Navy Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention](#) webpage.
- Visit the [USMC Substance Abuse](#) page.
- Check out the Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center's [Preventing Drug Abuse and Excessive Alcohol Use](#) website.
- Talk to your healthcare provider.

1. Chief of Naval Operations. OPNAVINST 5350.4D. Navy alcohol and drug abuse prevention and control. Published 4 Jun 2009. Accessed 2 May 2013.
2. Commandant of the Marine Corps. Marine Corps Order 5300.17. Marine Corps substance abuse program. Published 11 Apr 2011. Accessed 7 May 2013.
3. Chief of Naval Operations. NAVADMIN 130/12. Notification of drug testing program revision – Additional controlled prescription drugs. Published April 2012. Accessed 2 May 2013.
4. Food and Drug Administration. Combating misuse and abuse of prescription drugs: Q&A with Michael Klein, Ph.D. <http://www.fda.gov/downloads/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/UCM220434.pdf>. Published 28 July 2010. Accessed 3 May 2013.